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# **HWEHWEMUDUA**



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## **LIGNE EDITORIALE**

Essentielle pour le progrès de la société, les lettres, sciences humaines et sociales jouent un rôle fondamental. Elles permettent de comprendre le passé, d'entretenir la mémoire de l'humanité, de mieux comprendre l'humain dans la société, de développer la capacité d'analyse et de rédaction, d'enrichir les autres sciences et technologies par le questionnement de leurs impacts sociaux, culturels et environnementaux, de mieux anticiper l'avenir avec discernement et humanité, et de construire une société équilibrée. Quoi de mieux que des productions scientifiques pour la diffusion et la promotion des acquis de la recherche, des connaissances. C'est dans ce dynamisme que s'inscrit la revue ***Hwehwemudua***, qui se présente comme une lucarne d'expression, de diffusion et de promotion des résultats de recherche des universitaires.

Le choix du nom de la revue n'est pas anodin. *Hwehwemudua* qui peut être traduit par « bâton de mesure », dans la langue *twi*, est un symbole Adinkra issu de la culture akan. Il représente l'excellence, la persévérance et la qualité du travail. Il rappelle donc l'importance de l'effort et de la détermination pour atteindre l'excellence. Tout comme ce bâton, cette revue est un espace de partage, de diffusion de travaux rigoureusement menés par les universitaires qui y soumettent des manuscrits originaux.

Dans un contexte où les échanges interculturels et interdisciplinaires se font plus que jamais indispensables, la revue en papier et en ligne, ***Hwehwemudua*** qui est une revue pluridisciplinaire à parution trimestrielle, se positionne comme un vecteur de connaissances susceptibles de nourrir le débat, de stimuler l'innovation et de contribuer à l'enrichissement des sciences humaines et sociales, des lettres, langues et des civilisations.

Le Comité de rédaction espère que la lecture de cette revue vous inspirera autant qu'elle l'a animé lors de son élaboration. Que ces pages soient pour vous une invitation à explorer et à enrichir votre regard sur nos sociétés, en perpétuelles mutations.

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## VALORIZING BLACK WOMEN IN ERNEST J. GAINES' *A LESSON BEFORE DYING*

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### **Abstract**

This paper aims at showing how Black women in Ernest J. Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying* through their unflinching love, moral leadership and sustained persistence craft Grant and Jefferson. Through Patricia Hill Collins's feminist theoretical framework particularly her concept of self- definition in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*, this paper explores how women self-defined identities contribute not only to their own self-worth but also to the reconfiguration of Grant's selfhood and renovation of Jefferson's splintered self. The outcomes of my study reveal that through women's actions and behavior, Gaines reconceptualizes resistance, love and heroism as interrelated practices of care, resilience and dignity.

**Key words** : dignity, finding a voice, love, moral, self-definition.

## VALORISER LES FEMMES NOIRES DANS UNE LEÇON AVANT DE MOURIR D'ERNEST J. GAINES

### **Résumé**

Cet article vise à montrer comment dans *A Lesson Before Dying* de Ernest J. Gaines, les femmes noires, par leur amour inébranlable, leur leadership moral et leur persévérance constante façonnent à la fois Grant et Jefferson. A travers le cadre théorique féministe de Patricia Hill Collins en particulier son concept d'auto- définition dans *Black Feminist Thought : Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*, cet article explore comment les identités auto définies des femmes contribuent non seulement à leur propre estime de soi, mais aussi à l'ipséité de Grant et à la rénovation du soi fragmenté de Jefferson. Les résultats de mon étude révèlent que Gaines reconceptualise la résistance, l'amour et l'héroïsme comme des pratiques interconnectées de soin, de résilience et de dignité.

**Mots clés** : affirmation de soi, amour, dignité, moral, trouver sa voix.

## INTRODUCTION

The representation of Black female characters in African American literature has significantly evolved from stereotypical and marginal roles to complex and multidimensional characters. Modern African American writers portray Black female characters who defy harmful and traditional stereotypes and challenge pervasive myths. Thus, these female characters make choice, assert their independence and actively fight against injustice. Thus, Ernest J. Gaines underscores the crucial role played by Black women in their community. On this point, T. K. Rajan and Jayakumar J.(2025, p. 3423) articulate:

In the novel of Ernest J. Gaines, the role of women played a pivotal role in shaping their personal survival and empowerment of their communities. His female characters possess a unique strength that significantly contributes to the community's struggle for dignity and freedom.

From this, Gaines foregrounds Black women as pillars of survival and empowerment in their community. Their strength and resilience are pivotal to the quest for dignity, identity and freedom within the community.

The topic spotlights the worth and importance of Black women in the novel. Valorizing means assigning value and importance to a person. Enhancing Black female characters in *A Lesson Before Dying* subsumes pinpointing their worth and importance in the novel. Their worth is perceived through their crucial role in the plot.

Scholars who study Ernest J. Gaines' *A Lesson Before Dying* consistently highlight the central role of Black women as moral anchors and cultural preservers in the African American community. Thus, Thire Karan Rajan's and Jayakumar J.'s "Oppression, Struggle and Empowerment: Tracing Change in the Select Novels of Ernest J. Gaines" (2025) argue that his works explore how African Americans confront oppression and struggle for dignity, empowerment and self-discovery within a community and historical context. Their paper also includes discussion about how women serve as key drivers of change and empowerment. Melanie Johnson's "Black Southern Femininity" (2023) shows how Black female characters shape the destiny of the male characters and community through their quiet resolve, emotional labor and moral agency. Lauren J. Roth's "Females as Providers of Home and Identity in *A Lesson Before Dying*" in *Power Play in the African-American Home: Female Authority and Male Neglect in the Private Spheres of Ernest Gaines's A Lesson Before Dying, Of Love and Dust and in My Father's House* (2010) reveals how female characters mainly Miss Emma's food-centered gestures of love become a vital medium through which Jefferson's fractured

identity is reconstructed. Mahmoud Serwa Abd EL-Hamid Mahmoud's "The Power of Love Incites a Revolution in Ernest J. Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying*" (2019) underscores how the female characters particularly Miss Emma's moral insistence, love and care empower Jefferson to reconstruct his sense of identity and humanity.

Despite the growing body of research, there remains a gap regarding how Black female characters serve as spiritual backbone in their community and how they play central role in harmonizing traditional legacies with contemporary modes of thought and social change. Furthermore, existing studies do not analyze the valorization of Black female characters through feminist theoretical framework.

This paper examines not only Black women as moral and spiritual cornerstone of their community, but also as mediators between inherited traditions and modernity through feminist conceptual approach.

Black women are the true engines of the narrative. My objective is to show how Black female characters assert their selfhood, challenge oppressive stereotypes and contribute to the reconstruction of Grant's subjectivity and the reinvention of Jefferson's shattered selfhood. How do Black women serve as spiritual and moral anchors of their community? And how do they craft the identity and destiny of male characters in their community?

Our study is based on feminist criticism. We will resort to Patricia Hill Collins' concept of self-definition in *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* (2000). P.H Collins (2000, p. 114) claims that "self-definition speaks to the power dynamics involved in rejecting externally defined, controlling images of Black Womanhood". Collins' concept of self-definition focuses on Black women's rejection of the external, often harmful and negative stereotypes imposed on them by the dominant society. Instead, they define themselves through their own experience and self-worth. The key aspects of Collins' concept of self-definition encompass Black women's consciousness, finding a voice and womanist consciousness. We will use Collins' concept of self-definition to examine how Black women assert agency, challenge derogative stereotypes and reframe Grant and Jefferson's identities.

Our paper is divided into three main parts. The first part analyses how the women act as spiritual and moral anchors of the Black community. The second part examines how women

function as catalysts for male growth. The third one investigates how women perform as a bridge between tradition and modernity.

## **1- Black Female Characters as Spiritual and Moral Anchors of the Black Community**

This section underscores how female characters are valued as spiritual, emotional and moral bulwarks of the Black community. It highlights how they drive the plot through their faith, spiritual commitment, resilience, strength and selfless sacrifice. It pinpoints how they influence the course of the events through their leadership and commitment. This section is divided into two parts. The first part analyses how Black women act as the spiritual backbone of the Black community. The second one shows how Black women serve as the moral pillars of the Black community

### **1-1 Black Women as the Spiritual Foundation of the Black Community**

Women are prized as the spiritual backbone of the Black community. They are depicted as the most devout characters. They use their faith and spirituality as sources of hope and strength. Faith is the primary source of strength to endure the daily injustices of life and navigate hardships and suffering. When Aunt Emma is indignant by Jefferson's identification with a hog, she finds solace, relief, strength and hope in Tante Lou's consoling and spiritual advice and guidance. E. Gaines (1993) claims:

What I done done, Lou? she asked. What I done done? What I done done my Master to deserve this? My aunt saw that she was going to cry and she that she stood up and put her arm around her shoulders. Emma she said, Emma. The Lord is mercifull. What I done done? She was shaking her head and crying now....Have patience, my aunt said, patting her on the shoulder. The Lord is merciful (*A Lesson Before Dying*, <sup>1</sup>122-123).

This passage underscores how Tante Lou's comforting words and belief in God provide emotional and spiritual support to Miss Emma. Miss Emma is struck, shocked and deeply wounded by Jefferson's animal-like behaviour. Through reiteration twice, this excerpt reflects her deep-seated pain and sorrow. It reveals her desire for Jefferson to die with dignity and humanity. Her insistence highlights the immense racial prejudices that prevail at that time. In so doing, she relies on God's help to navigate this difficult situation. Furthermore, she leans on Tante Lou who is a lifelong friend and maternal figure for her. She provides emotional and

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<sup>1</sup> From this page on, the following references to my corpus will be indicated as *LBD*

spiritual support to Emma. Tante Lou cheers her up by encouraging her to have faith in God's mercy, reminding her that God's work can be accomplished even in the face of hardship. Tante Lou's comforting words and belief reassure Emma that God's mercy is still present. This reinforces her faith and hope that Jefferson can die with dignity. Tante Lou and Miss Emma shared belief in God is a source of spiritual comfort and strength. This helps them face the injustice they undergo.

Women's faith is obvious through the spirituals and hymns that they sing. Spirituals are the ways for women to give voice to their physical and emotional suffering. Thus, Miss Emma hums termination song in the dayroom of the prison during her visit to Jefferson. E. Gaines (1993,p.136) argues: "My aunt would say later that Miss Emma went about setting the table the same way she would have done at home, humming her termination song to herself." Miss Emma hums a song while setting the table to share the meal with Jefferson. The spiritual hymns she is murmuring provide her with emotional and spiritual sustenance in the face of hardship, adversity and oppression. Humming a spiritual helps her find a sense of normalcy and strengthens her faith. Spirituals serve as a counterpoint to the racist and oppressive environment and death penalty they are facing in the earthly world

Singing spirituals and hymns is connected to Collins' idea of finding a voice, an aspect of her concept of self-definition. In this regard, P.H. Collins (2000,p.99) claims that "the overarching theme of finding a voice to express a collective self-defined Black women's standpoint remains a core theme in Black feminist thought." Collins subsumes that finding one's voice implies recognizing that the women gain a voice by speaking from their unique lived experience. In so doing, they challenge the dominant narratives that depict them as submissive and voiceless. Thus, by expressing her pain, sorrow and longing through the spiritual she hums, Miss Emma challenges the dominant narratives that stereotype Black women as "mule", submissive and voiceless. Through the spirituals and hymns, she uses her voice to communicate her pain, grief, faith, hope and desire for freedom. E. Gaines (1993, p. 97) asserts that termination song is a spiritual hymn sung on the third Sunday of each month. The members of the church sing their favourite song on this occasion and tell the congregation where they are eager to spend eternity. Termination song is a recurring motif that highlights the power of faith and music to provide comfort, resilience and identity for the African Americans in the face of adversity.

Prayer is a fundamental aspect of women's faith. It provides them with a means of coping with racist environment. It is a way to maintain hope and dignity in the face of overwhelming despair. Thus, E. Gaines (1993,p.68) asserts that Tante Lou notifies Miss Emma and Grant to "tell [Jefferson] [She is] praying ." Tante Lou prays for Jefferson to receive God's grace and die with dignity, ensuring his soul will go to heaven. Prayer is a communal activity. Shared faith helps form a bond between characters. In this context, E. Gaines (1993, p.97) assumes that "Miss Emma came out of the house and the three of them continued on up to the church together." Miss Eloise, Tante Lou, Miss Emma and Vivian connect through their shared faith, shared experience and beliefs. They perceive faith as a source of comfort and strength. They regard faith as a way to cope with harsh realities of racism.

Women drive the plot through their Christian beliefs and their commitment to Jefferson's spiritual life and death with dignity. For Miss Emma, dying with dignity is inseparable from dying with a connection to God. On this matter, Gaines reports Emma's thought. E. Gaines (1993, p.22) writes: "I'm concerned for his soul. But I want him be a man, too, when he go to that chair." Emma is concerned about the spiritual well-being of Jefferson. For Miss Emma, helping Jefferson achieve dignity is directly tied to helping him find a connection to God. She believes that Jefferson's spirituality and physical dignity are linked. For this reason, she has enlisted the aid of Reverend Ambrose. E. Gaines (1993, p.166) argues: "do you know what [Miss Emma] told me? That Reverend Ambrose and I should get along and together – together – we should try to reach Jefferson." Miss Emma calls for Ambrose's assistance in order to build up Jefferson's spirituality. She believes that connecting with God will help him endure his suffering and face death honorably. This connection will strengthen his faith, and as a result, he will be saved and reach heaven. Women are not only perceived as the spiritual pillars of the Black community, but are also seen as its moral backbone.

### **1-2-Black Women as the Moral Keystone of the Black Community**

Black women are enhanced as the moral backbone of their community. They drive the plot and provide moral and emotional guidance through their unshakable love, strength, resilience and determination. Black women as the moral linchpin of the community is perceived through their power and authority in the domestic sphere mainly the kitchen. As a matter of fact, Black women command a certain authority in the kitchen. They exert their power and make demands on men. The kitchen is the space where Tante Lou and Miss Emma confront

Grant with his duty and responsibilities towards Jefferson. On this point, E. Gaines (1993) maintains:

WHEN I CAME HOME from school...I saw my  
 aunt and Miss Emma sitting at the table in the kitchen.....  
 My aunt told me to sit... down.  
 Sit down for what? I asked her  
 Just sit down, she said  
 What do want me to do? I asked her.  
 What can I do?  
 You the teacher, [Tante Lou] said  
 Yes, I'm the teacher, I said. And I teach...reading  
 writing and 'rithmetic. They never told me to keep a Black  
 boy out of a liquor store.  
 You watch your longue, sir, my aunt said.  
 He don't have to. Miss Emma said....  
 He go'n do it, my aunt said.  
 Oh? I said  
 You go'n do it, she said. We going up there and talk to Mr.  
 Henri.  
 Talk to Henri pichot?  
 For what? I asked her.  
 So you have the right to visit Jefferson (L B D, 10- 14).

This passage underscores Emma and Tante Lou's authority and leadership in the domestic sphere: the kitchen. The kitchen is the space where Grant is tasked with the mission to change Jefferson's animal-like behavior. In the face of his reluctance to fulfill his mission, Tante Lou and Miss Emma exert pressure on him. Their power and authority are visible through their authoritarian language to speak to Grant. Tante Lou's use of the expression "you watch your tongue" and her insistence on he/you "go'n do it" are evocative of her position of power and authority in the domestic sphere. The verb phrase "go'n do it" is a way of showing that Grant actually has no real option in the matter. This highlights his importance as a teacher and a figure of hope in the community. The kitchen is the space where decisions are made and orders are given. These decisions have powerful sway over the community and are forcefully carried out. The kitchen is a powerful symbol representing female authority and social hierarchy. In the kitchen, the gender roles are reversed. The women hold authority and acquire a sense of self-worth. The kitchen is the place where food is cooked. The one who feeds you and nurtures you may have authority on you. That is why beyond Grant, the school teacher, these old women were able to compel Henri Pichot to talk to the sheriff so as Grant gets the right to visit Jefferson. By exhibiting leadership and authority in the domestic sphere, the women manifest "womanist consciousness".

Womanist consciousness is an aspect of Collins' concept of self-definition. In this respect, P.H. Collins (2000, p.112) argues that "the issue of the journey from internalized oppression to the free mind of a self-defined womanist consciousness has been a prominent theme in the works of U.S Black women writers." Collins pinpoints the importance for Black women writers to create Black female characters who exhibit womanist consciousness. Womanist consciousness rejects the dominant group's controlling images of Black women. It focuses on the strength and experiences of Black women, highlighting their resilience and leadership in fighting against both racism and sexism. Miss Emma and Tante Lou use their power, authority and leadership within the domestic sphere to push Grant to fulfill his mission. Womanism was coined by Alice Walker in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983). This concept was created to recognize the specific struggles and contributions of Black women who felt overlooked by the feminist movement.

Black women's merit is perceptible through their selfless sacrifice and commitment to the welfare of the community. Tante Lou exemplifies selfless sacrifice and commitment to the uplift of her community through education. When Reverend Ambrose and Grant's conflict reaches its climax, the Reverend reveals to him the sacrifice Tante Lou has made and the pain she has endured to ensure his advanced education. E. Gaines (1993) assumes:

She been lying every day on her life, you aunt in there. That's how you got through that university cheating herself here... but always telling you she's all right. I 've seen her hands bleed from picking cotton. I' ve seen the blisters from the hoe and the cane knife. At that church, crying on her knees. You ever looked at the scrabs on her knees, boy? Course you never. 'Cause she never wanted you to see it (L B D, 218).

This passage highlights Tante Lou's devotion to Grant and her self-abnegation. She works extra hours to pay for Grant's education, enduring pain without complaining. The bleedings from her hand, the wounds and blisters are the evidence of the toilsome work she performs and the suffering she undergoes to ensure Grant's education and provide for him. This sacrifice and commitment are aspects of womanist consciousness. A. Walker (1983, p. xi-xii) explains that womanism is "committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, female and male." womanism centers Black women. It is committed to the well-being of the whole community, regardless of gender. It seeks liberation for everyone and is about healing justice and sustaining life across genders. Thus, Gaines's female characters embody womanism as they don't only take control of their life, but also strive for the well-being of all within their community. Ensuring the community's future through education is part of womanist consciousness. By sacrificing her own time through hard labor to fund Grant's education, Tante

Lou aims to create a future leadership and empower her community through education. This is the reason why she insists that Grant visit Jefferson to help him recover his dignity and humanity. She believes that as an educated person, he must devote himself to the well-being and survival of his community

In addition, Black women are esteemed through their ability to cope with complex situation. In reality, they navigate the racial hierarchy using art of persuasion and shrewdness. Women's strength and power of convincing are manifest through the scene in which Miss Emma asks Henri Pichot to use his influence to allow Grant to visit Jefferson in Jail. E. Gaines (1993) states:

I want ask you a favor, Mr Henri, Miss Emma said....  
I'm old, Mr. Henri, she went on. Jefferson go'n need me, but I'm too old to be going up there. Mr. heart won't take it. I want you talk to the sheriff for me... I want the teacher visit my boy. I want the teacher make him know he's not a hog, he's a man... I just want see him die like a man. This family owe me that much... I want somebody do something for me one time 'fore I closed my eyes (L BD, 20, 21, 22).

This passage brings to the fore Miss Emma's cogency, convincingness, forcefulness, astuteness and determination. Her reasoning is based on two main arguments. First of all, her arguments are based on the weight of the past. She reminds Pichot of all the physical and emotional labor she has devoted to Pichot family. She perceives this steadfastness as an unspoken debt. Secondly, she uses emotion. Actually, she uses emotional pressure by invoking the shame of Jefferson being called "a hog". As a result, she expresses her desire for him to die with dignity. She also feigns sickness to skillfully and emotionally manipulate Pichot so that he can agree to talk to the sheriff. Eventually, her art of convincing, masterly and emotional manipulation are successful. It is the best means of achieving what she most desires. Nevertheless, it is not Pichot's belief in Jefferson's rights that makes him acquiesce to her request. It is rather his guilt, sense of obligation and duty towards a devoted servant that make him concede to her plea.

By expressing her opinion and anxieties, Miss Emma demonstrates her freedom of speech and self-assertiveness, which resonates with Collins'idea of finding a voice. On this point, P. H. Collins (2000, p.99) writes: "African-American women have certainly expressed our individual voices. Black women have been described as generally outspoken and self-assertive speakers". Collins implies that African American women have long spoken up for themselves, expressing their own thoughts, experiences and identities. By making her voice

heard through the request she submits to Pichot, she challenges the dominant narratives which stereotype Black women as silent, subservient and docile. She actively uses her voice and communicates her thoughts and emotions with strength and confidence. The initial section of the paper elucidates the role of Black women as enduring spiritual and moral bulwarks within their community. The second section is devoted to male's growth and transformation under the influence of Black female characters.

## **2. Women as Catalysts for Men's Transformation in the Narrative**

This section analyzes how the Black female characters play a crucial role in the transformation of men. They serve as the emotional, moral, spiritual and maturational forces behind male metamorphoses. Their resilience, tenacious love and authority push the male characters—especially Grant and Jefferson—toward emotional, moral and spiritual growth. This section is divided into two parts. The first part analyzes how the Black female characters motivate Grant to accept his duty and responsibilities towards Jefferson. The second part examines how Black women are pivotal to Jefferson's transformation from a "hog" to a human being.

### **2.1. Mobilizing Grant**

Black women's worth is manifested through their will and determination to push Grant to acquiesce to the task of helping Jefferson regain his worth, dignity and humanity. Miss Emma's unyielding resolve is the engine of the story. Her insistence is evident in her request to Mr. Henri Pichot. E. Gaines (1993, p. 21-22) asserts: "I want the teacher visit my boy. I want the teacher make him know he's not a hog, he's a man. I want him know that 'fore he go to that chair, Mr. Henri." This passage underscores Miss Emma's determination to persuade Grant to help Jefferson understand his worth and humanity. Grant's role as a teacher is deeply symbolic. He symbolizes dignity, pride and uplift in the Black community. He is one of the few respected authority figures. She believes that he has the intellectual background, the authority and the power to debunk the white myth of Black sub-humanity. She assumes that he is the most prepared to challenge the belittling remark that Jefferson is a hog. In addition, she believes that a teacher's words carry weight. As a result, only a teacher can intellectually and emotionally help Jefferson overcome the trauma and anguish connected to his pending execution. Furthermore, she thinks that Grant bears a moral responsibility to assist Jefferson because the community has committed itself to his education. Therefore, he owes that community something in return.

Miss Emma's refusal to let Jefferson die like an animal is a direct challenge to the dominant narratives of the racist society that perceives Black men as subhuman. Her voice is expressed through her actions. She insists that Grant must teach Jefferson to regain his worth and dignity and face his execution with dignity. This shows her active role in the narrative. She shapes the events. Her presence is pivotal because it sparks Grant's transformation from a cynical and detached person to a man connected to his community; it also prompts Jefferson's metamorphosis from animal to human being. Without her push, dignity and courage, this would never have unraveled. Through her active role in the narrative, she goes beyond the stereotypical role of a submissive and voiceless woman. She challenges these expectations by asserting her will and concern. She moves from silence to speaking and from being defined by others to self-defining. This is exactly what Collins calls "finding a voice." On this matter, A. Lorde (1984, p. 40) maintains that Black women's journeys often involve "the transformation of silence into language and action." Black women have often been silenced by racism, sexism, class oppression and social expectations. This journey consists of breaking that silence, finding their voices, speaking the truth and turning this truth into action and change. Miss Emma moves from being silenced to speaking the truth. She uses her voice to create change by denouncing Jefferson's dehumanization and demanding dignity and humanity for him.

Furthermore, she uses emotional appeal. She plays on Grant's emotions and compassion. She knows that Grant is aware that Jefferson's label as a hog has broken her heart. So, she appeals to his conscience. She feigns illness. E. Gaines (1993, p. 75) affirms: "She coughed again—quick, dry, faked as before." She pretends to be sick in order to stimulate Grant to take on the responsibility of helping Jefferson reconnect with his worth and humanity. Miss Emma is the embodiment of manipulation in the novel. She uses subtle forms of manipulation to compel people to comply with her desires and wishes. On this point, M.S.A. Mahmoud (2019, p. 693) asserts: "Miss Emma plays the quietest role ever in the novel: she nets the plot by pushing other characters to do as she wishes through manipulation." Mahmoud argues that Emma is the driving force behind the story. She guides the events by influencing people to help Jefferson. She influences them through manipulation. Thus, she uses manipulative tactics such as emotional pressure (tears, silence, etc.), guilt, persistence, feigning sickness and community pressure to galvanize the other characters to help Jefferson. Thus, she has used emotional appeal, feigning sickness, moral and religious pressure, community pressure and silence to spark Grant to fulfill his responsibility towards Jefferson.

Like Miss Emma, Tante Lou plays a crucial role in Grant's responsibility towards Jefferson. She uses her authority as a matriarch. When Grant refuses to visit Jefferson in compliance with Miss Emma's wishes and orders, she adopts a firm and uncompromising tone and demeanor. E. Gaines (1993, p. 14) states: "You going with us to the quarter, my aunt said, as though I hadn't said a word. You go up there with us, Grant, or you don't sleep in this house tonight." This passage highlights Tante Lou's authority, her love and the pressure she exerts on Grant so that he must fulfill his responsibility. She gives him an ultimatum; any refusal on his part will jeopardize his right to remain in Tante Lou's house. She believes that it rests with him, as an educated Black person, to help Jefferson rediscover his humanity. The tone is firm and uncompromising; her stance allows for no alternative. This lays bare her strength and authority. Her insistence that Grant visit Jefferson reveals the emergency of the situation. Emma is completely downcast and is under pressure; she brings her moral and psychological comfort. She expects Grant to exhibit the same level of commitment. She expects a collective action to help Jefferson maintain his dignity. Community and collective action are aspects of womanist consciousness. They involve a commitment to the survival and wholeness of the entire community. She requires the whole community to sustain Jefferson's transformation. This line is a turning point in the novel because without her insistence and determination, Grant may never have agreed to engage with Jefferson.

Like Miss Emma and Tante Lou, Vivian has played a key role in stimulating Grant to stay involved with Jefferson. Contrary to Miss Emma and Tante Lou who use moral pressure and authoritative tactics, Vivian combines love, kindness and understanding to inspire Grant to visit Jefferson. E. Gaines (1993) writes:

'I want you to go up there,' Vivian said.  
They make those decisions, sweetheart, I don't...  
I want you to go. For me.  
For you?  
For us, Grant.  
I don't know if I can take it. I really don't.  
I know you can.  
I'll need you every moment  
I'll be there (LBD, 32).

This excerpt underscores the strategies used by Vivian to prompt Grant to visit Jefferson. She uses emotional intelligence, empathy and moral reasoning to convince him. Actually, she appeals to his moral conscience. She makes him understand that avoiding commitment to Jefferson's transformation is a form of moral abandonment and a way of shirking his obligations. She uses gentle persuasion rather than force. She speaks to Grant calmly, softly

and with deep understanding; as a result, he is all ears. Grant's recognition of his need for Vivian is clear evidence of the extent of her influence on him. Her physical presence gives him the emotional strength he needs to face the situation and helps him overcome his cynicism and selfishness.

Grant's transformation is the result of the influence of the three women on him. They have galvanized him to outstrip his own cynicism and selfishness. In so doing, he assumes a more heroic posture grounded in self-sacrifice. They are not only catalysts for Grant's commitment to Jefferson's dignity and worth, but also a driving force in Jefferson's own metamorphosis and self-realization.

## **2-2 Shaping Jefferson**

The narrative elevates women by underscoring their parental agency in shaping Jefferson's transformation. Miss Emma is the initial force behind Jefferson's transformation. Actually, she is grieved by Jefferson's comparison with a hog. She requires that he die like a man. As a result, she enlists Grant with the support of Tante Lou to teach Jefferson self-worth, dignity and humanity. Tante Lou's toughness and firmness construct the essential conditions for Jefferson's moral and psychological metamorphosis. In the absence of Tante Lou's unrelenting pressure, Grant would not have embraced the moral duty assigned to him. Miss Emma also brings Reverend Ambrose into the fold. She believes that his spiritual authority can help Jefferson rediscover his faith, endure his suffering and face death with dignity. Miss Emma's strategy combines emotional influence, moral authority and persistent advocacy to construct the environment for Jefferson's transformation.

Thus, Miss Emma's emotional leverage creates the foundational conditions necessary for Jefferson's moral and psychological transformation. In one of the scene, Jefferson's conduct devolves into animalistic behavior, reflecting the depth of his dehumanization. His animalistic behavior has grieved Miss Emma. E. Gaines (1993,p.123) states: "Miss Emma looked up at [Grant]. The tears were still rolling down her face". This moment captures Miss Emma's profound emotional suffering as she realizes the depth of Jefferson's dehumanization. This scene marks the beginning of Jefferson's emerging self-awareness. He likely realizes that his attitude grieves those who love him, which plausibly leads him to resist the degrading label imposed on him. This moment reasonably motivates him to reclaim his dignity and humanity. In point of fact, Emma's cries and grief express a powerful and an unspoken message: "you are

not a hog. You are a human being.” This nonverbal communication presumably drives Jefferson to embrace his humanity.

Besides, Miss Emma’s use of emotional leverage is perceptible through her love for Jefferson through food. The act of providing food carries emotional and symbolic weight. Cooking for someone strengthens and reinforces the relation between the cook and the eater. It is a nonverbal message of care and support. Enjoying the meal is an act of love and mark of consideration. In this sense, Miss Emma cooks for Jefferson to exhibit her unfaltering love for him. In return, he enjoys the meal, which bears metaphorical significance. E. Gaines (1993) describes the gumbo scene:

The look of his nannan’s face, the look on my aunt’s face, the way Jefferson raised the spoonful of gumbo and rice to his mouth with both hands and dipped the spoon again and raised it to his mouth, because I had asked him to do it (L B D, 196).

This scene is a pivotal moment in Jefferson’s gradual humanization. The act of eating gumbo with a spoon symbolizes Jefferson’s willingness to regain his humanity, dignity and sense of worth. It is a nonverbal expression of love and acceptance of care offered to him. It is the evidence that Miss Emma’s efforts to transform Jefferson from a mere brute to human being have not been fruitless. With respect to this, C. Ramsey (1995, p.46) discusses the connection between food, love and power: “food... not only provides nourishment and a means by which love is expressed but also serves as a medium to exert power, to express other emotions of acceptance or rejection and to communicate these feelings to others.” Ramsay implies that food does not only provide physical sustenance, but also carries emotional, social and symbolic relevance. Miss Emma, Tante Lou, and Grant’s students’ act of bringing gumbo and other meals to Jefferson is a mark of love, care, concern and human connection. Jefferson’s acceptance of the food is an unspoken message of his willingness to engage with others.

Jefferson’s final transformation results from women’s unswerving love and affection for him. He clearly states it before he is taken to the electric chair. E.Gaines (1993,p.254) asserts: “Tell Nannan I walked. And straight he walked, Grant Wiggins.” “Tell Nannan” implies that Miss Emma is pivotal to his transformation. Her wish has been fulfilled. By dying with dignity, he debunks the entrenched stereotypes of Black inferiority and inhumanity propagated by the white power structure. Jefferson’s death with dignity resonates with Claude McKay’s famous poem. “If We Must Die”. On this matter, C. McKay (1953, p. 36) writes:

If we must die, let it not be like hogs.

Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,  
While round us bark.  
The mad and hungry dogs,  
Making their mock at our accursed lot.  
If we must die, O let us nobly die

McKay implies that even though death is inevitable, people should face it with honor and dignity. Jefferson faces death bravely and nobly, challenging and deconstructing racist myth that Black people are less than human. Women serve as agents of change in reshaping men's attitude and conduct in the novel. In addition to that, they function as pivotal agents, facilitating the interplay between traditional cultural frameworks and modern expectations.

### **3. Reconfiguring Cultural Continuity: Women's Mediating Role between Traditional Values and Contemporary Practices**

This section explores how Black women perform as key figures in managing the interplay between inherited cultural traditions and social contemporary practices. Vivian is positioned as a pivotal figure who shapes the interface between traditional cultural frameworks and modern expectations. This is perceived through her relation with Grant. She encourages Grant to reconcile his modern critical rationalism with the community's traditional expectations. She urges him to detach himself from his cynical, self-centred attitude and to commit himself to the well-being of his community. Actually, Grant expresses a desire to escape the confines of the rural South, thus distancing himself from the communal duties and expectations placed upon him. She reminds him that he cannot evade the responsibilities connected to his position as an educated Black man. E. Gaines (1993, p.29) contends: "Some people can, but we can't, [Vivian] said. We're teachers and we have a commitment." Grant replies to her plea. E. Gaines (1993, p.29) stipulates: "You hit the nail in the head there, lady-commitment. Commitment to what-to live and die in this hellhole, when we can leave and live like other people." She challenges Grant to move beyond bitterness, egocentrism and scepticism and dedicate himself to the betterment of the community. She underscores the moral and social responsibility connected to his profession. She reminds him that as teachers, they have social and moral obligations towards the students. Their responsibility goes beyond academic instruction to include instilling values, courage and dignity especially in a context where Black people's humanity and worth are denied. However, Grant longs to leave the South and withdraw from the burdens of responsibility placed upon his shoulders. This is clearly perceived through his declaration: "Commitment to what". This declaration is an indication of his inclination to avoid communal duties and expectations placed upon him.

Negotiating the tensions between inherited traditions and modern expectations implies blending emotional wisdom with intellectual understanding. Indeed, Vivian understands the community's needs and expectations. However, she also perceives Grant's desire for change. Nevertheless, she believes that the commitment to the uplift, well-being and the survival of the community outweighs personal and self-focused ambition. Hence Vivian's assertion. "Some people can, but we can't, [Vivian] said". E. Gaines (1993, p.29). This affirmation acts as an exhortation for Grant to transcend his narcissism and fulfill his moral and communal obligations.

Functioning as a pivotal mediator between established traditions and contemporary social practices implies balancing traditional roles with modern career. Vivian respects and upholds traditional norms, which connects her with shared cultural inheritance. She is a dedicated mother. She is devoted to her children's education and does the household chores. On this matter, E. Gaines (1993, p.207) specifies: "I got up from the bed and went through the living room and back into the kitchen. I could smell the red beans warming on the stove.... Vivian was at the sink, making a salad." This quotation reveals her domestic role and nurturing role. It shows her connection with home, family and daily life. The cooking of red beans connects her to her cultural inheritance. Red beans are considered as traditional cultural food in many Black communities in the United States of America. Creole prizes them. Such dishes carry symbolic meaning as they represent the preservation of cultural identity. She is deeply rooted in community's culinary tradition while embracing modernity and progressive values through her profession as a teacher. E. Gaines (1993, p.92) declares: "I went to Vivian's classroom. The school had only five rooms and in some, the classes were doubled. Vivian taught the sixth and seven grades. The children had all gone and she sat behind her desk, looking over paper." Vivian is a professionally educated woman who works as a teacher. Working as a teacher symbolizes intellectual advancement, modern social mobility, autonomy and self-determination. It subsumes that she is economically independent and modern-minded. Vivian blends traditional cultural expectations through culinary traditions and modernity through her profession as a teacher. In this way, she becomes the key agent in negotiating the interface between inherited cultural traditions and contemporary aspirations.

Furthermore, Vivian's challenge to her family norms illustrates her function as an intermediary between inherited customs and contemporary perspectives. In fact, she renegotiates her community norms by marrying a dark-skinned Black man against her family's will. As a result, she is ostracized from it. E. Gaines (1993) mentions:

Vivian had met and married a dark-skinned boy while attending Xavier University in New Orleans. She had not hold her people about the wedding, because she knew that they would be opposed to it... Everything turned out just as she had feared. Her family had nothing to say to her husband and hardly anything to say to her... When her first child was born, she took the baby to visit. No one held the child or gave it a present or any attention (LBD, 111-112).

This passage spotlights Vivian's predicament because of her deviation from the normative boundaries of Creole social hierarchy. Actually, Vivian's family is portrayed as lighter-skinned and belongs to the Creole community. Creole communities have historically valued skin color and cherished certain social standards (education, class and respectability). To her parents, her husband who is a dark-skinned does not fulfill these criteria. They believe that she transcends social barriers by getting married with a dark-skinned man. This is perceived as an act of defiance and a departure from entrenched Creole standards of endogamy and class cohesion. As a result, she is ostracized from her family. Marrying a dark-skinned Black man against established Creole socio-cultural expectations is connected to Collins' concept of self-definition, particularly the aspect that emphasizes assertion of personal agency and autonomy. In fact, Vivian's subversion of rules that structure the relationships between Blacks, Creoles and Whites represents a transgressive action. It is an affirmative action through which one asserts and expresses his vision of the world. Vivian rejects color-based rules, arguing that an individual's worth is what truly matters. Therefore, Vivian is a progressive character who initiates affirmative actions though that may lead to community indignation. Furthermore, her act is perceived as a resistance to externally imposed definition, an aspect of self-definition. By defying her family's expectations, Vivian resists externally imposed norms of femininity and marital respectability, asserting her autonomy and defining her identity and life choices

## CONCLUSION

Our findings can be summarized in three major points. At the outset, the results of our investigation reveal that Gaines reshapes resistance through women. Resistance is articulated through women's systematic refutation of hegemonic narratives that confine them to reductive and negative stereotypes. Secondly, the outcomes of our research indicate that Gaines reframes heroism. Heroism is not only a public act such as Jefferson's walk to the chair, but is also rooted in compassion, endurance, selfless love and sacrifice. Thirdly, Gaines reconceptualizes love by redefining it not as romantic love, but as duty and moral obligation to sustain dignity even when the outcome is foreordained. Love implies labor and sacrifice; it is also about asserting

humanity, making it an act of resistance against dehumanization. Thus, love becomes a political and ethical act.

This paper elevates Black women as the moral, emotional and spiritual backbone of the community. Through their staunch love, resilience and spiritual fortitude, they empower Jefferson to reconstruct his fractured self while simultaneously triggering Grant's inward transformation in consciousness and responsibility.

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